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MUSICAL ANIMALS IN ORNAMENT

By CLEMENT ANTROBUS HARRIS

FROM a very early period of the world's history, men of an imaginative mind have delighted to represent animals as doing things which more prosaic mortals regard as a human prerogative. It would be a strange thing indeed if among the loved arts which man has liked to assume that his four-footed friends shared with him, music had not been included. And as a matter of fact it was one of the first with which his imagination, aided in many cases by observation, endowed them.

Greek mythology abounds in instances. Witness Orpheus and the wild beasts who, hearing the mournful strains of his lute, tried in their dumb way to comfort him; and the dolphins which Arion lured to the side of his ship by his wonderful playing. Nor was poetic licence over-stepped by the mythologists, even when

The poet

Did feign that Orpheus drew trees, stones, and floods.

for acousticians have proved time and again the power of sound to move inanimate matter. And if the dolphin myth was not founded on fact, then Dame Nature has deigned—not for the first time—to take a hint from fiction. For less than a century ago the fishermen of the Shetland Isles, north of Scotland, were in the habit of playing on the bagpipes a certain tune, called in Gaelic *Caberfae*, because it attracted the seals! And in his book on Northern nations, Olaus Magnus, a Scandinavian bishop of the sixteenth century, tells of a bear being attracted by the playing of a bagpiper. And he further says that shepherds have pipes because animals love music, and names a double-pipe, or 'seeck-pipe' as being used by shepherds because it made their flocks feed better!—with which we may compare the human practice of having music at meals.

The same idea is to be found in the art of the Middle Ages. But speaking generally our mediæval forefathers were much more crude than the mythologists, for they loved to represent animals as actually playing upon manufactured instruments. True, an instance akin to this may be cited from Roman mythology: Triton, Neptune's son and trumpeter, is usually depicted by draughtsmen

as performing on an instrument: but he was only half a fish, having a human head, and his trumpet was not a man-made one but a shell. Quite possibly a number of these mediæval pictures and carvings were symbolic, rather than intended to be understood literally; but in many instances it is impossible to resist the conclusion that they owe their existence to a love of burlesque.

The earliest example of this literal treatment of the idea which I can find is a pillar, believed to have been erected in 1110, A. D., in Canterbury cathedral, England, and which forms the subject of our first-illustration.

Reading from left to right, the first musician is of semi-human form with wings and horns: probably intended for a devil—it would not be the only instance of a denizen of the nether world being represented as practising the Divine Art! The instrument he plays is quite clearly of the violin type, played with a bow, though the manner in which it is grasped by the left hand would not make the ‘stopping’ of the strings very easy! The second figure also has horns but is clearly an animal—a goat I take it. His instrument is of the oboe kind, the bell-shaped end and three of the holes being very distinct. (There is a lizard-like creature entwining itself round the lower limbs of the goat, but though it seems interested in the music it does not itself appear to be handling any instrument. Perhaps the sculptor was thinking of serpent-charming!) The instrument held by the third player is the least distinct of the four: the animal is believed to be a greyhound, and as the instrument is held to its mouth it is evidently a member of the wind band, and has been taken for a flute. An instrument is known which is played by being held to the mouth and yet, though affected by the breath, is not primarily a wind instrument, namely, the Jew’s harp, or as some would call it, the jaw’s harp. But our stone quartet had been playing in dumb and motionless show for five hundred years before 1619, the earliest date to which the Jew’s harp can be traced back. So, apart from other reasons, our greyhound colleague cannot be playing that favourite instrument of school-boy musicians. There can be no doubt about the fourth instrument: it is a harp and is in the hands of a griffin. It is interesting to think of the varied audiences to which this little band of performing animals has in imagination played during the eight hundred years which have elapsed since their conductor, the sculptor, laid down his chisel, and taking a step or two backward, feasted his eye on his finished work! In Pre-Reformation days masses for the repose of the soul of Edward the Black Prince must have been said in the crypt—

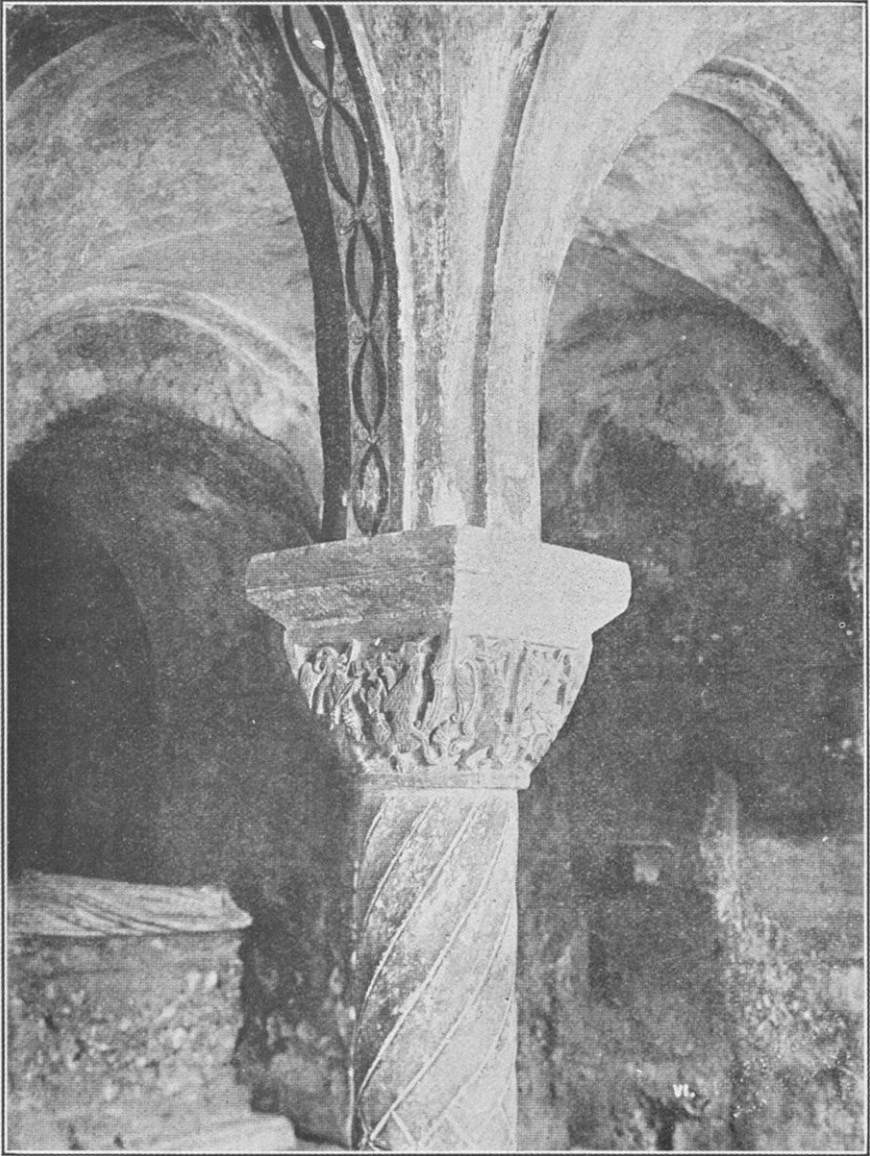


Plate I. Earliest known example of Musical Animals in Ornament.
Canterbury Cathedral, England. Date about 1110 A. D.

Photo by B. & W. Fisk-Moore, Canterbury.

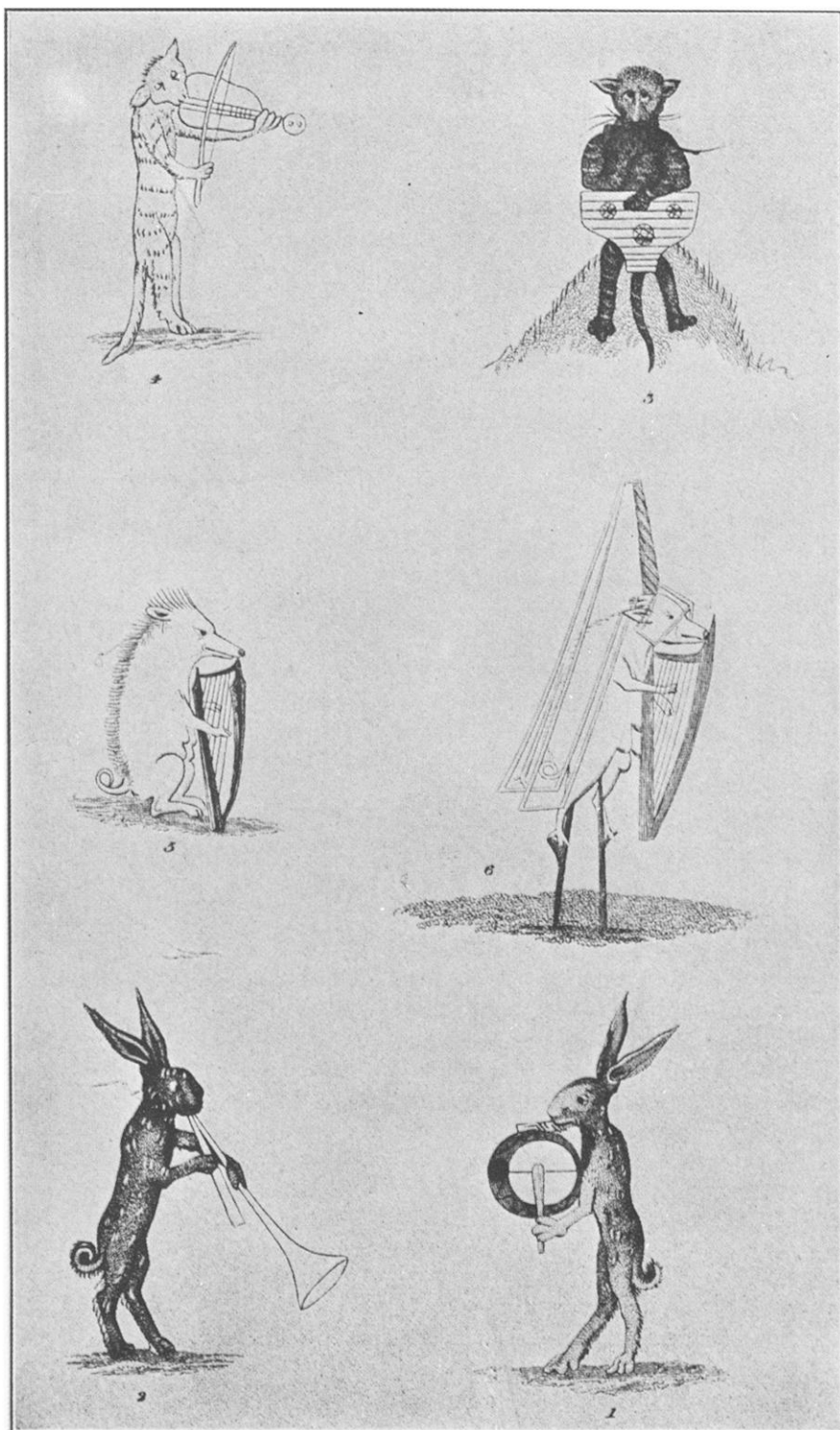


Plate II. Musical Animals from *Jube Domine benedicere* (cir. 1320), and Froissart's Chronicles (cir. 1360).

where the pillar is—for the south transept of it is a chantry bearing his name.¹ And in 1576 the use of the same place was granted to the French Huguenot refugees, and with occasional intermissions they have used it ever since, a service in French being held there every Sunday at 3 P. M. It is also not unprofitable to contrast the immense advances made in music itself during the same octet of centuries with the comparatively small changes in the means of producing it: for the four instruments which these animals are playing are still in use with but little alteration in form!

Whether or not any deeper meaning underlies the representation of animals as playing musical instruments, there can be no doubt that as already pointed out a contributory cause was humour pure and simple. And very striking to the modern mind is the incongruity of the places in which such humour is enshrined—almost always in some building or manuscript of a sacred character! The reason is probably to be found in the fact that for centuries the monastery was the only harbour of refuge for the gentler arts, and the outlet for his humour which an artist could not find in his church-work he could find nowhere. Thus one of the richest stores of musical whimsicality is to be found, not as one might have expected it to be, in some mediæval copy of a Greek comedy, but in—a book of prayers! The work to which I refer is entitled *Jube Domine benedicere*; it is in the British Museum (Harleian MSS., 6563); is inscribed on vellum, with illuminations (gold and stones); was written probably between 1320–1340, and most likely in the South of England or South Midlands; and from it the figures 1 to 4 of *Plate II* are taken.

In the bottom right-hand corner will be seen a hare playing a pipe and tabor. These instruments were extremely popular for centuries, chiefly for accompanying dancing, and were both played by one performer simultaneously. I do not think that they were ever used in connection with devotional exercises, though we shall shortly come across another representation of them in an ecclesiastical work. Emulated by this hare is another one also playing two instruments (*Figure 2*). But these are apparently a horn and a flute, the simultaneous playing of which by a human performer would certainly not be easy if, indeed, possible! The Egyptians and Assyrians were acquainted, as I believe some African native races are, with the double aulos, commonly called a flute. And

¹The antiquarian reader may be interested to know that the tomb to the left of the pillar in *Plate I* is that of the Countess Atholl, grand-daughter of King John. She died 1292.

one tube in these instruments was sometimes longer than the other, as is the case in the illustration before us. This larger pipe is believed to have supplied a drone bass to a melody played on the shorter one. And the *flûte-à-bec*, or flute with a beak mouth-piece at the end, called on the continent *flûte d' Angleterre* from its popularity in England, was sometimes made in double form; but apparently, like the modern double flageolet, both tubes terminated in a single mouth-piece. It is clear, however, from the bell-like end of the instrument held in the left paw, that in *Figure 2* the instruments are of different kinds.

One must not assume that in drawing such pictures as these the artist's imagination was wholly unaided. It is quite possible that fancy had been stimulated by witnessing the performances of animals trained to play instruments as a trick. For the device has been a favourite one with showmen from very early ages, and probably in all parts of the world. Flavius Arrian, the historian, born about 100 A. D., who included India in his survey, tells us (*Rerum Indicarum, lib. xiv*) that he "saw an elephant beating cymbals, and others dancing to the sounds;" two of the cymbals, fastened to the animals fore-legs, were struck alternately, a third was attached to its trunk, and as the leviathan advanced the other elephants followed. And it is on record that some fourteen hundred years later a hare had been taught to do exactly what the hare in *Figure 1, Plate II* is doing. Caius, in his "*De Canibus Britannicis, ap Burman Poetæ Latini Minores, tom ii, page 498*, tells us that in England in 1564 there was exhibited "a hare dancing and beating a drum, like a drummer, with its forelegs." And an essay entitled *Taste of the Town or a Guide to all Public Diversions* published in London in 1731 (Essay VIII, p. 236), records that a hare was shown on the stage of a crowded theatre beating a tabor.

In *Figure 3, Plate II*, we have a cat playing a dulcimer. Judging from the expression of pussy's face, one is rather confirmed in the idea of the picture having been suggested by a trick performer, for her feelings do not seem to have been sweetened by the dulcet tones implied in the name of the instrument! *Figure 4* is another cat, playing a three-stringed rebec, a precursor of the violin, of Arabian or Turkish origin and introduced into Europe in the ninth or tenth century. The drawings just detailed are not the only musical ones by which the devotions of anyone using this book are likely to be disturbed! Proverbial lore asks with a sceptical accent 'what can you expect from a pig but a grunt?' The reader will not have gone far in the following pages before discovering that if an answer is to be read in the pencil and chisel work of the

fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, very much more than a grunt may be expected—nothing less, indeed, than the playing of almost every instrument known at the time! Not even the King of Instruments is excepted: for there is a drawing in this manuscript which, though crude, is evidently intended to suggest that the proudest of instruments is not beyond manipulation by the most despised of animals! Nor do the pipe and tabor, horn, dulcimer, and fiddle exhaust the musical accomplishments of the hare and cat, for both these animals are also portrayed as playing the bag-pipe. The illustrations in this manuscript are in the margin, and do not appear to have any reference to the text, which consists largely of litany suffrages.

The association of the 'Queen of Instruments' with the most domesticated of animals in *Plate II, Figure 4*; in the well-known old nursery rhyme beginning:

Hi diddle, diddle,
The cat and the fiddle.

and in the not uncommon tavern sign 'The Cat and Fiddle,' almost suggests some special reason for the combination. Dr. Brewer, however, tells us that the sign referred to is simply a corruption of *Caton le fidèle*, meaning Caton, Governor of Calais. (Similarly the 'Pig and Whistle' sign originally had no reference to either an animal or a musical instrument, being a corruption of Anglo-Saxon words meaning a bowl and wassail or New Year salutation over the spiced-ale cup). And the necessity for finding an instrument which would rhyme with 'diddle' (=to cheat) probably explains the rest.

Contemporary with *Jube Domine benedicere*, or thereabouts, was the rebuilding of Melrose Abbey, one of the finest monastic piles in Scotland, founded in 1136; and forming part of the external architecture is a stone carving of a hog playing the bag-pipe. To us moderns this may be exactly the instrument we should expect a porker from North of the Tweed to play, if it played at all. But in the twelfth century the choice was less obviously appropriate, for the national instrument at this time was the harp: the bagpipe did not become common till some two centuries later, at the time, curiously enough, of its decline in England. The rebuilding, however, went on till 1505, and the hog may have been a late addition.

Crossing over to the Continent we shall find Froissart, in 1388, at Brabant, finishing the second volume of his Chronicles. And in a splendid illuminated copy of them, made for Philippe de

Comines after his second marriage, therefore about 1473, and now in the British Museum (Harleian MSS., Nos. 4379, 4380, in folio) is one of the most remarkable examples of an animal musician: we may, indeed, call him a super-pig, for he is wearing one of the most cumbersome forms of head-dress human beings have ever designed for themselves—which is saying a great deal!—and is walking on stilts, and playing an instrument which requires both hands—in this case trotters—for its manipulation, namely, the harp. And all of this at one and the same time! Such a performance certainly deserves pictorial representation, and we give a reproduction of that by Froissart's copyist on *Plate II (Figure 6)*. The head-dress, it should be explained, is that which was common among gentlewomen in the fifteenth century. It seems to have been customary among artists of the period to represent animals in pairs, and as companion to this pig we give another one from the same source and playing the same instrument (*Figure 5*). Though natives of the sty, as we have already seen, are occasionally depicted playing upon other of man's musical inventions, there seems to have been a peculiar fondness for associating this most ponderable of brutes with one of the most ethereal and romantic of instruments—the harp!

Under one of the stalls in the cathedral at Ripon, England, is a carving believed to date from 1485, of two hogs dancing to bagpipe music played by a third hog. This idea of one animal entertaining others of its own species is not uncommon. The town of Beverley, Yorkshire, is peculiarly rich in carvings, both wood and stone, of musical interest. In St. Mary's Church, on one of the stalls, is carved a group of five festive pigs, one of which is playing a bagpipe while the others appear to be dancing to the music. Possibly this humour was intended to keep the occupants of the stalls awake: for these richly carved oaken seats were intended for the use of the monks during sermon and are ingeniously so contrived that while alert the sitter is comparatively comfortable, but if he falls asleep they unhinge and his dream ends abruptly on the floor! I have tried them: there was, it is true, no sermon to go to sleep to at the time, so I had to simulate somnolence, but the invention proved its complete adaptability to the end in view, and I sincerely hope that there were no dull sermons in those days!—the sixteenth century or earlier.

Hitherto the animals represented have all been natives, or practically such, of the country in which the illustrations of them were made. But at the period just named we come across interesting evidence of advances in the art of navigation, in the

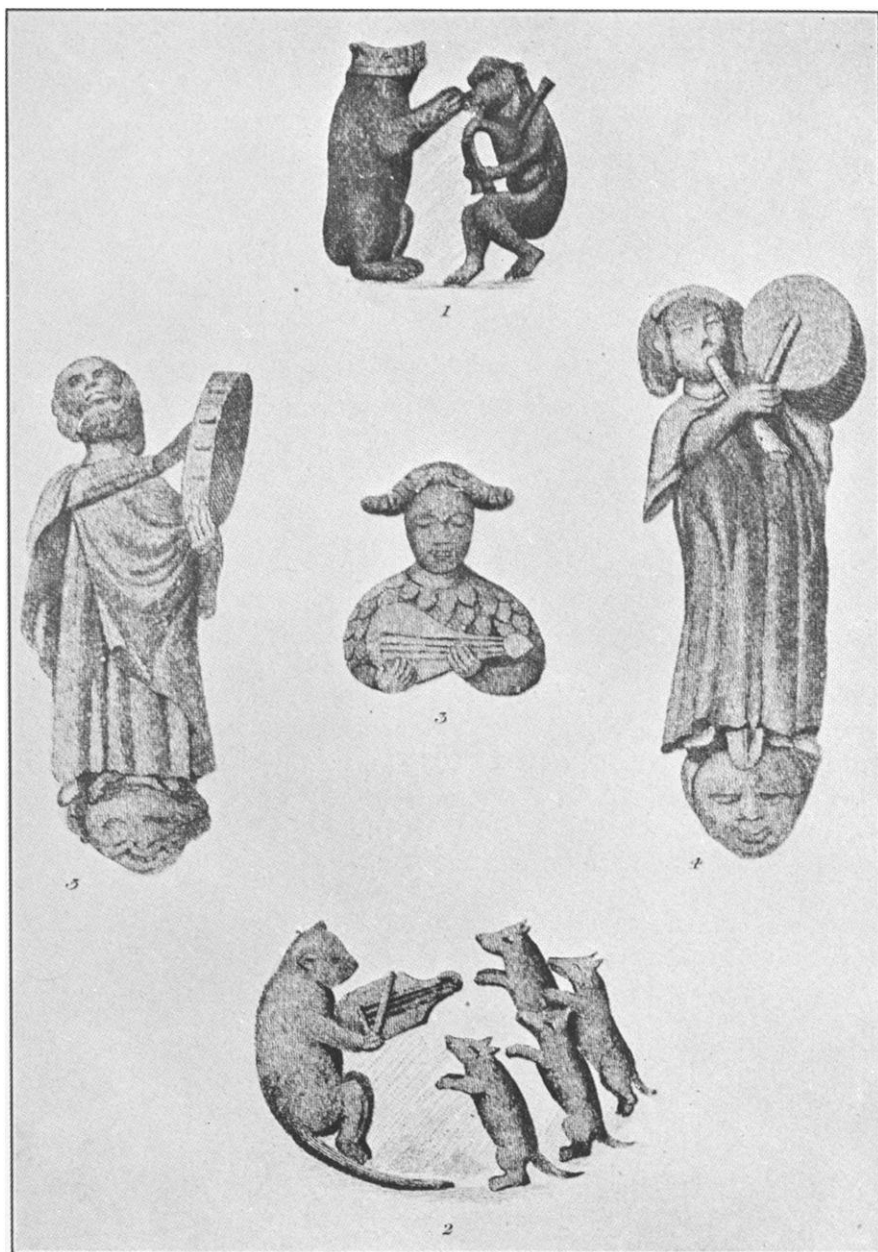


Plate III. Men and Animal Musicians. Beverley, England, early XVIth century.

form of animals brought from distant climes. Without leaving our present whereabouts—Beverley Minster—we can inspect the similitude of a bear learning to dance, or at least to adopt human postures, to a bagpipe tune played by a monkey—both, be it noted, imported animals. Despite his muzzle and unnatural attitude Bruin looks, I think, a good deal happier than his instructor! (*Plate III, Figure 1*). In the same ideally beautiful building may also be seen a group of animals as common in Europe as those just mentioned are rare—four young rats, dancing to music played by a senior of the same species. Precisely what instrument this latter performs on is not easy to say, owing to the peculiar way in which it is held, but it seems to be of the violin type since it is played with a bow (*Figure 2*).

In one respect the town of Beverley can boast of being musically unique: it has two ‘Minstrels’ Pillars’—that is, pillars either actually carved, or paid for, by the local minstrels, and containing figures of musicians. There is one in the Minster and one in St. Mary’s Church. Since they include no animal delineations they do not strictly concern us here. But I take the opportunity afforded by a little spare room on *Plate III* to give examples of these figures, from the Minster group. And the more so as the pipe and tabor player (*Figure 4*) enables an interesting comparison to be made with the same instruments in *Plate II, Figure 1*. One of the players (*Figure 3*), has a foreign expression, suggesting India, probably due to his peculiar head-dress: he plays an instrument of the guitar type—it has no bow. The instrument held by *Figure 5*, is clearly of the tambourine kind.

The bear and monkey were probably among the earliest four-footed foreigners (if one may so describe an ape) to be brought into England. For among the numerous carvings in Westminster Abbey is a woodland scene representing a group of monkeys along with a bear playing on a bagpipe. It is one of eighty or ninety carvings in Henry VII’s Chapel. Being on the under surface of the seats these beautiful products of chisel and gouge are apt to be overlooked. On entering the chapel by the brazen gates the carving in question will be found underneath the seventh stall of the lower row to the right. The date is probably in the early sixteenth century. About the same time (1506–22), St. John’s Church, Cirencester, England, was rebuilt: and this, too, can boast a musical monkey, its instrument being the bagpipe.

As in the case of native animals, it is not impossible that the craftsmen who carved these bears and monkeys had a living model to copy from. A pageant given at Brussels in 1529, in honour of

Philip II of Spain, was quite possibly not the first of its kind. And a leading feature of this show was "a bear seated at an organ, whence very good tones of treble and bass were obtained from a score of cats" while many wild beasts danced round a great cage containing two apes playing on bagpipes.

We need not take Juan Christoval Salvete, from whose account the above record is taken, too literally. The organ he mentions may have been like that with which the Abbé Baigné some sixty years earlier had amused Louis XI of France. This venerable professor of things spiritual had

collected a great many pigs of different ages, and placed a kind of organ keyboard in front, and by touching the keys little spikes with which they were armed, made them squeak in such order and consonance as highly diverted the king and his attendants.

And possibly the secret of the bagpipe-playing monkeys of Brussels is to be read in the fact that in England a few years later (time of Edward VI, 1547-53) orders were given to an artist to cover

six counterfeit apes of paste and cement with grey coney skinnies, which were made to serve for a maske of bagpipes, to sit upon top of them lyke mynstrells, as though they did play.

Similarly it is on record that "musicians were sometimes concealed within triphons [tritons?] and dolphins.

Since it is so familiar as both a beast of burden and figure of speech, one is surprised at the difficulty of discovering a donkey among these animal musicians. I know of only two instances. In the cathedral church at Hamburg is a tombstone on which is carved an ass playing on a bagpipe. If of the same date as English work of the same style it may be ascribed to the sixteenth century. The animal struts erect on its hind feet holding the instrument with its fore-legs. And in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England, is an etching, probably intended as the design for a glass panel, the subject of which is an ass playing the organ (Plate IV). Schottus, an author who devoted his attention very largely to curiosities, tells us that a Sicilian at Palermo produced music from asses by selecting a quartet of male animals whose braying was on different notes, covering in all an octave: he had himself heard them several times. So the Hamburg artist may have been, so to speak, sketching from nature! I have myself heard a dog made to whine on a given note, by the sound being repeatedly sung, and a piece of sugar exhibited but withheld till the canine vocalist had whined at the correct pitch!



Lower Rhenish School
About 1500-1520

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Plate IV. An Ass playing the Organ
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By kind permission of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

Most of the performers so far represented have been soloists: even when they have been grouped, it is doubtful whether their performance was intended to be simultaneous. But with the growth of the orchestra in modern times we find bands represented, all the players being generally one kind of animal. In at least one case the particular animal was evidently chosen with a satirical purpose. Sir J. G. Dalyell says in his *Musical Memoirs* that about the year 1849 a friend of his visiting Dresden returned with a whole orchestra of monkeys, including a *maestro di capella* of the same genus, in lively effigy, made of porcelain. He understood "that these devices were a *jeu d'esprit* levelled at a distinguished modern composer whose fame is justly and too firmly established to be injured by such assaults of jealousy" (I take it the reference is to Wagner, who was conductor of the opera at Dresden, 1843–49, and produced *Rienzi*, *Flying Dutchman*, and *Tannhäuser* there). And before me as I write, stands a beautifully executed little bronze orchestra of cats, of Austrian workmanship. There is a Conductor, the instruments are grand piano; violin; banjo; guitar; flute; horn; big and little drum and cymbals; and they accompany a solo vocalist.

In summing up one cannot but be struck by the predominance of the pig in the mediæval musical menagerie. It has been suggested that the choice was made in derision of the Jews among whom the hog was regarded as unclean. Personally I do not think so, but rather that the cause was love of the grotesque, no animal being so far removed from the ideality associated with the Divine Art as are swine. For the same reason we look in vain for a bird in these representations: birds are naturally so musical that to put an instrument into their claws is superfluous! I have heard that in one of the English cathedrals—my informant did not know which—a bird touching a rude cittern (kind of guitar) with its feet, is depicted in one of the stained glass windows. But this is the only instance I can recall.

Equally striking is the predominance of the bagpipe among instruments. In various forms this instrument is to be found in all quarters of the globe, and at one time was immensely popular. Evidence, indeed, is not wholly lacking of its use in church. Our zoological orchestra has included ten animals, the goat, griffin, greyhound, pig, hare, cat, monkey, donkey, rat, and bear; and fourteen instruments, the organ, bagpipe, oboe, harp, flute, pipe and tabor, horn, dulcimer, violin, guitar, banjo, piano, cymbals, and drum: of these, five animals play the bagpipe; three the flute; and one or two each of the other instruments.